You wanted more

—"Please don’t crush this love, simply for your amusement."

Tui's childhood was spent in Pattaya.

Not the Pattaya of the postcards—not the neon, not the nightlife, not the tourist-brochure version of the city that existed in the imaginations of people who had never lived there. The real Pattaya. The early-morning Pattaya. The Pattaya that existed before the city woke up and put on its costume.

Because Pattaya was not just a place. Pattaya was a texture.

The texture of wet sand under bare feet at seven in the morning, the sand still cool from the night, the footprints filling with water as the tide came in—each print a brief autobiography, a record of a foot that had been here, had pressed this deep, had weighed this much, and was now gone. The texture of salt air on skin, the particular way the moisture clung to the fine hairs on his forearms and dried in the breeze and left a residue that tasted, when he licked his lips, of the sea.

The texture of his sister's hand in his.

Her hand was always warm. Always certain. The hand of a person who knew where she was going and who was bringing him along not because she had to but because she wanted to, because the bringing was part of the going, because Tui's presence at her side was not an obligation but a choice she made every morning when she woke up and found him already waiting at her bedroom door, barefoot, sandy, ready.

She pulled him toward the shoreline. Her friends behind them carrying a portable speaker that played songs he was too young to understand but old enough to feel—the bass traveling through the sand, through his feet, up his legs, into the center of his chest where it settled and stayed and became, without his knowing it, the first music he ever loved.

His sister was nine years older.

Nine years between them meant that when Tui was learning to walk, his sister was learning to navigate the social architecture of school. When Tui was seven and discovering the beach—the tide pools, the hermit crabs, the small miracles that existed in the margin between land and water—his sister was sixteen and discovering the world beyond it. She existed in a different temporal zone—ahead of him, always ahead, moving through life at a speed he could observe but not match, the way a younger child watches an older sibling and sees not a person but a preview of the future.

She took him everywhere.

To the beach—where Tui spent hours crouching over the water, looking at the small, trapped ecosystems that existed in each pool: the anemones with their waving tentacles, the tiny fish that darted like silver thoughts, the crabs that moved sideways with the urgent, purposeful, completely directionless energy of creatures that were busy being alive and didn't have time to explain themselves.

"What are you looking at?" she asked once, standing behind him, her shadow falling over the pool.

"Everything," he said.

"You're weird, little one."

"Thank you."

She would laugh. The laugh was low, warm—the same register that Tui's voice would later settle into, the gravelly baritone, the genetic inheritance of a family that communicated in bass notes.

Her friends tolerated him. More than tolerated—they absorbed him, the way older teenagers absorbed a younger sibling's presence: with mild annoyance that softened into affection, the eye-rolling that became hair-ruffling, the get out of here that became come here, sit down, what do you want to drink?

The absorption had consequences. By the time Tui entered school, he had already been socialized by people five and six and nine years older than him. He knew things—not academic things, not the things that school measured, but social things. He knew how to talk to adults. He knew how to navigate groups. He knew the specific, subtle, unwritten rules of human interaction that most children his age were still learning: when to speak and when to listen, when to push and when to wait, when to be present and when to disappear.

This made him popular. Not the sharp, competitive popularity of a boy who demanded attention, but the warm, gravitational popularity of a boy who made people comfortable—who remembered names, who asked questions, who listened with the full, patient, unhurried attention of a person who had learned, on the beach, that the most interesting things revealed themselves to those who were willing to wait.

He loved photography before he had a camera.

He watched the tourists with their cameras—the way they pointed the lenses at the sunset, at the water, at each other, the mechanical click of the shutter a small, decisive punctuation mark in the ongoing sentence of the day. He watched the way the camera changed the tourist's relationship with the world—the way the

viewfinder created a frame, and the frame created a choice, and the choice created meaning. Without the camera, the sunset was just a sunset. With the camera, the sunset was this sunset, this moment, this specific arrangement of light and color and time that would never happen again and that the camera could save.

He wanted that. The saving.

He bought his first camera at sixteen. Secondhand. A Canon AE-1—the body scratched, the leather grip worn smooth by previous hands, the lens slightly fogged at the edges in a way that gave every photograph a soft, dreamlike quality that he initially tried to fix and eventually learned to love. He found it at a market—a vendor who sold old electronics and broken watches and the accumulated, discarded objects of other people's lives. The camera cost him weeks of tips from the restaurant.

He photographed everything. The beach at dawn—the light hitting the water and turning it into a field of moving silver. The restaurant at closing—the empty tables, the stacked chairs, the residual warmth of a space that had held people and was now holding their absence. His parents—his mother in the garden, his father behind the counter, the two of them existing in the specific, partnered, side-by-side labor of people who had built a life together and whose life was the building.

The tide pools. The tourists. The boardwalk at sunset. The city at night.

"You see things differently," his sister told him once, looking through a stack of his prints. She was home from university for the weekend—brief, bright, the visit compressed into forty-eight hours that felt like both too much and not enough. "Most people photograph the ocean. You photograph the footprint the ocean left behind."

"The footprint tells you more," Tui said.

"About what?"

"About who was here. And what they were carrying."

She looked at him. The look was long—the look of an older sister recognizing that her little brother was no longer little, that the boy who had followed her to the shoreline was becoming a person with his own eyes, his own frame, his own way of seeing.

"When did you get so wise?" she asked.

"I learned from watching you."

She laughed. She pulled him into a hug—the hug that smelled of her shampoo and the salt air and the specific, irreplaceable, sister-scented warmth that would later exist only in memory.

School went by quickly—the speed of a life that was too full for pausing. Part-time jobs at the restaurant, homework, photography, recycling. The days were long and the years were short and the time passed in the specific, accelerated, blurred-at-the-edges manner of a childhood that was not leisured but labored—not unhappily, not bitterly, but with the steady, productive, purposeful rhythm of a family that worked together because working was how they survived and surviving was how they loved.

He had friends. The friends were numerous and shallow—He knew everyone. Everyone knew him. The bartenders, the shop owners, the fishermen, the temple monks, the school teachers, the tourist guides. But he wasn't anyone's best friend. The breadth of his social life had a cost: the depth. He was the person you invited to everything and confided in about nothing. The person who was always present and never essential. The person who filled a room and emptied it without anyone noticing the difference.

He didn't mind. Or he told himself he didn't mind. The tide pools had taught him patience, and patience was a cousin of loneliness, and he had learned to live with both.

Then his sister left.

She went to university. The first in the family. The departure was celebrated—his parents proud, the restaurant closed for the day, the neighbors informed, the achievement broadcast through the town's informal, everyone-knows-everything communication network with the same speed and thoroughness that the network applied to everything, good and bad, private and public. Tui was proud too. He photographed her leaving—the suitcase in the trunk, the car pulling away, the dust settling on the road. He kept the photograph. He kept all the photographs.

He was seventeen when his sister came home.

She came home with two things: a university degree and a pregnancy. The pregnancy was—unexpected. Not unwanted—his sister's face, when she told them, carried not shame but the fierce, complicated, terrified joy of a person who had received a gift she hadn't asked for and was determined to deserve. But unexpected. The town talked. The town always talked. His parents absorbed the talk the way the beach absorbed the tide—without resistance, without complaint, the talk washing over them and receding and leaving only the faintest residue.

The months passed. The pregnancy progressed.

Not one baby. Triplets.

The news arrived via ultrasound—three heartbeats where one had been expected,

three bodies curled together in the dark interior of his sister's body, three lives beginning simultaneously in a space designed for one. His sister laughed when the doctor told her. The laugh was high, surprised, slightly hysterical—the laugh of a person whose life had just been multiplied by three.

"Three," she said, looking at Tui. "Three, Tui. I'm going to have three."

"You've always been an overachiever," he said.

"I'm going to need help."

"You're going to have it."

His sister's health worsened. She was brave. She was twenty-six years old and she was carrying three human beings inside her and she was doing it with the same fierce, certain, hand-in-his energy that she had always brought to everything.

Then the babies were born.

A new light in the world. Three babies. Three new lights—small, red-faced, screaming, the screams not of distress but of arrival, the sound of three people announcing their existence to a world that had been waiting for them.

And his sister did not survive.

His family was devastated. The word was not large enough. No word was large enough. His mother—who had tended the garden with quiet, relentless attention, who had held the family together with the specific, structural, load-bearing love of a woman who understood that families were not given but built—his mother did not leave her room for three days. His father—behind the counter, in the restaurant, the place that was his life and his labor and his identity—his father stood at the counter and served customers and his hands shook and no one mentioned the shaking because mentioning it would make it real.

But the babies needed them.

Three babies. Three mouths. Three sets of lungs that needed to breathe and stomachs that needed to fill and bodies that needed to be held and rocked and changed and fed—the relentless, biological, non-negotiable demands of three new lives that did not understand grief and could not wait for it to finish.

The babies saved them. Not metaphorically. Literally. The babies' needs created a structure—a scaffolding around the demolished building of the family, a framework of feedings and diapers and sleepless nights that gave them something to do with their hands and their hours and their love, the love that had been directed at the sister and now, suddenly, had no address and needed to be redirected before it turned inward and became something destructive.

Tui considered quitting school. The math was simple: if he quit school, he could work full-time. If he worked full-time, he could help. If he helped, the family might survive.

The math was simple and the math was wrong, and his mother knew it.

"You are going to study," she said. "The money is my problem. Your problem is your future. Your future is your problem."

Not asked. Said. The sentence delivered in the kitchen, at the table, the table where the family ate and argued and planned and grieved. Her voice was the voice she used when the topic was not open for discussion—the voice of a woman who had lost her daughter and was not going to lose her son to the same gravity.

So he continued. He continued studying. He sent applications to universities—the applications filled out at the kitchen table, the same table, the pen moving across the forms with the specific, mechanical, grief-powered efficiency of a person who was doing what they'd been told to do because the telling came from the person they trusted most.

Then he was accepted. The acceptance letter arrived in the mail—thin, official, the bureaucratic confirmation of a future that had been uncertain and was now, suddenly, concrete.

The university in the city. Bangkok. Five hours from Pattaya. Five hours from the beach and the tide pools and the restaurant and the three small bodies that were growing daily, that were beginning to smile, that were beginning to look—he could already see it, the resemblance arriving in increments—like her.

And even though it hurt, he went.

Bangkok was not Pattaya. Bangkok did not have texture. Bangkok had velocity. The city moved—constantly, relentlessly, the traffic and the people and the construction and the noise creating a current that carried you if you let it and drowned you if you didn't.

Tui let it carry him. He found work. The money was necessary—not for himself but for the three small bodies five hours away, the triplets who were growing into boys, who were learning to walk and talk and fight and laugh, who were becoming people, who needed shoes and food and the things that children needed, the things that cost money, the things that Tui sent home in the form of transfers that left his account lighter and his conscience quieter.

He did graffiti as a job. Not the secret, midnight, spray-paint-under-the-bed kind—that would come later, the private art, the unsanctioned marks on the city's surfaces that were his signature and his confession. The paid kind. Painting school walls—murals for elementary schools, the bright, cheerful, primary-colored images

that children's institutions required, the suns and the animals and the flowers that Tui painted with professional competence and without personal investment, the work done not for art but for rent.

He started helping a classmate photograph events. The classmate needed a second photographer. Tui needed the money. The events were various—corporate gatherings, university parties, gallery openings, the relentless social calendar of a city that never stopped celebrating and never stopped documenting its celebrations.

At one of these events—an illustration fair at a university gallery, the kind of event that attracted artists and students and the specific, colorful, alternative community that existed in Bangkok's creative margins—he met Nut.

Nut was at a booth. Displaying anatomical sketches—detailed, beautiful, the drawings of a person who understood the body not as a shape but as a system, the muscles and the tendons and the bones rendered with the precise, loving attention of a person who found beauty in architecture.

"These are incredible." Tui said.

Nut looked up. The serious face. The perfect smile that appeared slowly, like a sunrise. "Thank you."

"You draw like a surgeon."

"My father is a surgeon."

"And you?"

"I put art on people instead of taking things out of them."

Nut introduced Tui to the world of tattoos. To the studios, the conventions, the community. To the specific, sacred, irreversible art of putting permanent marks on skin—the art that was both ancient and contemporary, both personal and public, the art that said this body is mine and I have chosen what it carries.

Tui photographed Nut's work. The tattoos on the clients' skin—the way the ink interacted with the muscle, the way the designs moved when the bodies moved, the way the permanent marks told stories that the mouths above them sometimes couldn't.

They became friends. The friendship was easy—the ease of two people who operated at the same frequency, who valued the same things: craft, honesty, the careful, patient, no-shortcuts approach to making something beautiful.

Then Tui met Lego.

The meeting happened at a place Tui would not normally have been—a gothic Halloween event with a circus theme, the kind of event that attracted the alternative community and the curious and the people who dressed in costumes that cost more than Tui's monthly rent.

He said yes to the event because the alternative was sitting alone. Because sitting alone was something Tui did more than he admitted—the extrovert's secret, the crash that came after the performance, the empty apartment and the silence that was not peaceful but heavy, the weight of a man who spent his energy on others and had nothing left for himself.

The venue was large and dark. Red colors—red walls, red curtains, the red of a heart, a wound, a theater. Colored lights moved across the ceiling, the beams cutting through artificial fog that smelled faintly of glycerin and cinnamon. People in costumes filled the space—costumes that looked like they had been planned for months, the elaborate, detailed, commitment-intensive costumes of a community that took its self-expression seriously.

Tui held his camera. The camera was his shield—had always been his shield, the object that justified his presence in any space, the tool that said I belong here because I am documenting here.

He was waiting for the clock to run out. Photographing the event with the professional, competent, emotionally-detached efficiency of a person who was working, not experiencing. He met the organizer—brief handshake, professional smile. The shop owners—polite, forgettable. The owner of the food truck—interesting, slightly eccentric, the kind of person Tui would normally have photographed for his personal portfolio but didn't because the energy wasn't there tonight. A chalkboard menu with coffees named after horror characters: The Bride, The Count, The Creature.

The dancers—a troupe of performers who moved through the crowd in character, their movements choreographed, their costumes detailed.

He photographed the attendees. The professional work. The documentation.

And then.

In the middle of it all. In the low light and the fog and the red.

Lego.

The silk was red. The ribbon was suspended from a rig at the center of the venue—high, the ceiling tall enough for performance, the apparatus professional, the setup the work of people who understood that aerial arts required engineering as much as

artistry.

And Lego was the spider.

The white skin catching the colored lights—the red and the blue and the gold playing across the body like stained glass, the body itself a window, translucent, the light passing through rather than bouncing off. Black hair—long, loose, not braided, not bunned, the hair free, moving with every shift of the body, the strands catching the light and holding it briefly before releasing it, each strand a small, temporary, light-carrying filament.

Bare feet. The feet wrapped in the silk, the toes pointed, the arch of the foot a curve so precise and so beautiful that Tui's photographer's brain registered it as a composition rather than an anatomy—the foot and the silk and the light forming a triangle that was perfect, that was the kind of thing you spent your entire life trying to capture and that appeared, sometimes, without warning, in the middle of a Halloween event in a warehouse in Bangkok.

And the dress—gray and white, the fabric light, gauzy, the kind that disappeared against certain lights and reappeared against others, the garment functioning not as clothing but as an extension of the performance, another layer of silk, another surface for the light to play on, the dress and the ribbon and the skin and the hair all blending into a single, luminous, gravity-defying composition that was—

Beautiful.

The word was insufficient. But it was the word his brain offered, and his brain was a precise instrument, and if the precise instrument said beautiful, then beautiful was what it was.

Tui couldn't stop looking. His camera was up before he made the decision to raise it—the collector's reflex, the photographer's instinct, the body overriding the mind because the body understood that this moment was not going to wait for the mind to finish processing it.

He shot. And shot. And shot.

The body in the silk—climbing, wrapping, releasing, the movements fluid and controlled and terrifying, the specific, disciplined, one-inch-from-disaster precision of a person who understood that the art and the danger were the same thing and who chose the art anyway.

At one point—midway through the routine, suspended upside down, the hair falling toward the floor, the face inverted—the performer looked directly at the camera.

At Tui's camera. At Tui's lens. At Tui.

The eye contact lasted one second. Maybe less. The performer's eyes—light-

colored, catching the red lights, throwing them back as golden sparks—found the lens and held it and the one-second contact felt like a conversation, like a question, like the specific, charged, electric moment when two people see each other simultaneously and both of them know it.

Tui took forty-seven photographs of Lego. He counted later. On his memory card, in the review, scrolling through the evening's work: the forced smiles, the punch spill, the food truck, the dancers, the crowd. Forty-seven images of one person. More than he had taken of everything else combined.

He met Lego backstage.

Backstage was a generous word for a corner of the venue separated from the audience by a black curtain and furnished with folding chairs and a rack of costumes and a mirror ringed with bulbs that were mostly burned out. The air smelled of sweat and chalk and the glycerin fog that had drifted behind the curtain.

Lego was sitting on a folding chair. The aerial silks were coiled beside him like sleeping snakes—red, dormant, still carrying the warmth of the body that had climbed them. He was drinking water from a bottle. The gauzy dress was still on—slightly damp, clinging. The black hair was tied back now, a messy knot, the practical ponytail of a person who had finished performing and was now existing in the aftermath.

Tui approached. His camera in his hands. The professional excuse ready—I'm the photographer, I was hoping to get some backstage shots—but before he could deploy it:

"You're the one who was standing by the espresso truck."

Lego said it first. Before Tui could introduce himself. The light-colored eyes—up close, even more striking, the contacts creating an intensity that was less about color than about attention, the eyes of a person who noticed and remembered.

"Yeah," Tui said. "That was me."

"Did you get the shot?" Lego asked. "The one where I'm upside down?"

Tui pulled up the camera's review screen. He scrolled to image 871—the inverted face, the eyes finding the lens, the one-second eye contact that had lasted a lifetime. He held the camera out.

Lego leaned forward. His eyes widened. The widening was genuine—not the performed surprise of a person who was used to being photographed and was pretending to be impressed, but the real, unguarded, pupil-dilating surprise of a person seeing themselves in a way they hadn't seen before.

"Oh," Lego said. "Oh, that's really good."

"Thank you."

Tui looked at the image. He looked at Lego. The water bottle. The damp dress. The eyes that were honest and bright and looking at him with the specific, focused attention of a person who had recognized something in him and wanted him to know it.

"I'm Lego," Lego said.

"Tui."

"Do you photograph a lot of circus stuff?"

"This is my first circus anything."

"Really?" The eyebrows rose—the surprise genuine, the face transparent, every emotion visible, the expressions moving across the features the way weather moved across a sky, openly, without concealment. "You shot it like you've been doing it for years."

Lego looked at him. The look lasted longer than it needed to. The backstage air was warm. The burned-out bulbs buzzed.

"Do you want to get tea?" Lego asked. "They have really good jasmine tea at the truck out front. The one with the horror movie menu."

"It's a coffee truck."

"They have tea too. I don't drink coffee." A pause. A smile—small, private, the smile of a person sharing a preference as if it were a secret. "I eat the ice, though. The ice is really good here."

"You eat ice."

"Don't judge me."

"I'm not judging. I'm—"

Lego laughed. The laugh was bright—bright and warm and musical, the laugh of a person who laughed with their entire body, the sound traveling from the chest to the mouth to the room to Tui's chest, where it settled in the same place the bass had settled on the beach, years ago, when his sister's friends played music through a portable speaker and the sound traveled through the sand and into the center of him and became the first music he ever loved.

This was the second.

Lego didn't reject him. Lego didn't look at his secondhand jacket and his chipped-lens camera and his earth-toned, recycled, clearly-not-gothic aesthetic and make

the calculation that most people in this venue would have made: you don't belong here. Lego looked at him and saw a photographer. A person who saw moments. A person who had captured the thinking.

And Lego was kind. Not the performed kindness of a person who had been taught to be polite—the genuine, instinctive, biological kindness of a person whose heart was too big for their body and who distributed the excess through touch and laughter and the specific, relentless, impossible-to-resist warmth of a personality that was designed for connection.

Tui watched Lego bloom over the months that followed. He watched the short-haired eighteen-year-old grow into the long-haired, ribbon-wearing, platform-boot-stomping, nail-art-creating, piercing-collecting, social-media-commanding force that Lego became. He watched the shy boy at the backstage folding chair become the person who walked into rooms and changed their temperature.

And he knew.

He knew the way Nut had known about tattoos—instantly, totally, the recognition of a thing that was meant for him.

He had never felt this before. Not in Pattaya, where the friends were numerous and shallow. Not at university, where the connections were professional and temporary. Not in any of the social spaces he navigated with such effortless, democratic ease.

He had never liked anyone romantically before Lego.

The realization arrived not as a thunderbolt but as a tide—slowly, steadily, the water rising around him until he was standing in it, until it was up to his waist, until it was undeniable. He loved Lego. He loved the brightness and the vulnerability and the way Lego used physical contact as language and the way Lego's laugh changed the chemistry of every room it entered and the way Lego looked at him—with the specific, trusting, full-hearted attention of a person who had chosen him as one of the few people allowed inside the walls.

He wanted more. More of Lego. More than the friendship. More than the phone calls and the backstage conversations and the shows he attended and photographed and the photographs he kept—hundreds of them, thousands, each one a love letter he couldn't send.

But Tui hadn't said it. He was afraid of breaking something precious by asking for more than he was offered. The friendship was a gift—a real, warm, necessary gift—and Tui understood gifts, understood that they were not owed and not guaranteed and not to be taken for granted by a person who had lost the most important person in his life and knew, with the bone-deep certainty of grief, how quickly the things you loved could be taken away.

So he took what was offered. He took the friendship. He took the phone number and the texts and the invitations to shows and the backstage conversations and the way Lego leaned against him when he was tired and the way Lego called him P'Tui with the specific, affectionate, the syllables carrying the weight of trust.

He took the offered thing and he held it carefully. The way you held a camera. The way you held a photograph. The way you held the memory of a sister's hand in yours.

And he didn't ask for more.

The mansion smelled of floor wax and expensive lilies. This was the smell of Lego's childhood. Not the warm, organic, human smells of cooking and laundry and the specific, irreplaceable scent of a mother's skin—but the chemical, institutional, deliberately maintained smells of a house that was not a home but a display, not a shelter but a stage.

The house was large. The largeness was not measured in square meters but in distance—the distance between the front door and the kitchen, the distance between Lego's bedroom and his parents' bedroom, the distance between rooms that contained people and rooms that were empty, which was most of them, most of the time.

The house was designed for entertaining. For hosting. For the specific, performance-based, socially choreographed events that Lego's parents organized with the precision and the ambition of people who understood that architecture was not just about buildings but about lives, and that a life, like a building, could be designed.

"He's a beautiful child," his mother said. "My treasure."

She said it to everyone—to the guests, to the neighbors, to the friends who came for the dinner parties and the colleagues who came for the business events and the strangers who came because the house was beautiful and the invitation was prestigious and being inside these walls meant something about your own walls.

She said my treasure. And the saying was true. But the truth of it was complicated—the complication of a word that meant both precious and possessed, both valued and kept, both loved and displayed.

It took her eight years to get pregnant again. Eight years between his sister—who was nine years older—and him. Fourteen years between his brother—the eldest, the first design—and him. Lego arrived at the end of a sequence, the final element in a composition that had been started long before he existed, the last child of parents who were no longer young and who had already built the framework of their family and who received him not as a beginning but as a completion.

A beautiful child. A treasure. A project.

When Lego arrived—small, healthy, beautiful—he was the proof that the wanting had worked. He was the evidence that the investment had paid off. He was the treasure.

But treasures, in this house, were kept in cases. Treasures were displayed, not touched. Treasures were valuable precisely because they remained perfect, pristine, unchanged by the ordinary wear of being used.

And Lego—five years old, soft-hearted, desperate for the warmth that the cold surfaces couldn't provide—Lego was a treasure that wanted to be held.

"Mama?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Can you hold me?"

"I'm holding you, sweetheart."

"No—can you hold me? Like, tight?"

His mother held him. She did hold him. She held him with one arm while the other hand checked the time, the hold timed, scheduled, fitted into the gap between the caterer's arrival and the florist's delivery. The hold was real. The hold was also temporary. And Lego learned, before he had the words for it, that love in this house came with a schedule and that the schedule was more reliable than the love.

"What's wrong, darling?"

"I don't know."

"You have everything you need. Look at this house. Look at your room. Look at all the lovely things."

He learned early that his value was tied to how well he could stand still. He spent his childhood looking at himself through other people's eyes—adjusting, calibrating, performing the version of himself that the audience required, the beautiful child who sat quietly and smiled correctly and existed, like the lilies, as decoration.

When no one was looking—when the guests were gone and the lilies were wilting and the floor wax was drying and the house was empty in the way that large houses were empty, not vacant but hollow, the rooms full of expensive things and devoid of warmth—when no one was looking, Lego cried.

He cried in his mother's arms, when she was there. He pressed his face into his mother's chest and he cried and his mother held him—she did hold him, she was not a monster, she was a woman who loved her child in the way she had been

taught to love, which was precisely and conditionally and with one eye on the clock because there was a dinner at eight.

"What's wrong, treasure?"

"I don't know."

"Are you hungry? Are you tired?"

"I'm lonely."

"You can't be lonely, darling. We're all here."

But all here meant her body in the room and her attention somewhere else—on the guest list, on the florist, on the sister who was leaving for university, on the brother who was building his career, on the house that needed maintaining, on the life that needed performing. All here meant present and absent simultaneously, the paradox of a family that occupied the same building and lived in different rooms.

He begged for hugs from his siblings.

"Can I sleep here?"

He would ask it from the doorway—small, pajama-clad, his bare feet cold on the marble, his hands twisted together in front of his chest, the posture of a child who was asking for something he'd been taught not to need and was bracing for the rejection.

He slept in his siblings' rooms when his parents weren't home. His sister let him. His brother tolerated it. They were teenagers—fourteen and nine years older respectively—and the tolerance was the specific, impatient, eye-rolling tolerance of people who had their own lives and their own needs and who saw their baby brother as a doll rather than a peer.

But children grow.

Ten was the age when the distance between him and his siblings became uncrossable. Too old to beg for hugs. Too old to stand in doorways in pajamas. Too old to ask someone to look for monsters in the closet. The rules of childhood expired, and the rules of adolescence arrived, and the new rules said: you are alone now, and the aloneness is normal, and if you feel it as pain, the pain is yours to manage.

"You're too old for this, Lego."

"Go back to your room."

So he cried alone. In his room—the large room, the beautiful room, the room that his parents had designed with the same precision they applied to everything, the room

that was perfect and cold and empty in the way that large rooms were empty when they contained one small body and nothing else.

Nobody was awake. Nobody was watching.

His siblings grew up. They closed their doors. The doors were real—heavy, wooden, expensive—but the doors were also metaphorical, the closing of the access points through which warmth had once, briefly, reached him.

And when the crying didn't help—when the tears ran out but the pain remained, when the emptiness inside him grew larger than his body could contain, when the loneliness became not an emotion but a condition, a state of being, a permanent resident in his chest—

He found another way to release it.

He was twelve when he started cutting.

The blood was red. The same red as the silk he would later climb. The same red as the curtains in the house, the curtains that hung in the rooms where the entertaining happened, the rooms where the performance was staged.

The pain was sharp. The sharpness was—Relief. The specific, immediate, undeniable relief of a sensation that was real, that was physical, that existed in the body rather than in the mind, that replaced the vague, floating, impossible-to-locate pain of loneliness with the precise, locatable, manageable pain of a wound.

Lego did not want to die. The distinction was essential. The distinction was the line between the cutting and the catastrophe, the line that held, that never broke, that kept him on the side of the living even when the living was painful.

Lego wanted to feel. He wanted to feel something that was his—not performed, not scheduled, not displayed for an audience. Something that happened inside his body and belonged to him alone.

Nobody noticed because the cuts were hidden under his expensive clothes—the long sleeves, the designer fabrics, the costumes that his sister sent from fashion weeks and that his mother displayed on him like art on a wall. He would take baths and the water would turn pink—faintly, the dilution making the color soft, almost beautiful, the pink of sunset or of skin. He would touch the wounds in his sleep. As they healed, the skin tightening, the tissue knitting itself back together, the cuts becoming scars—the scars becoming part of him, the permanent record of the pain that no one saw.

The change came when he was thirteen.

He saw a video. Online—the internet, the same internet that connected lonely children to the world and to each other and to the things that could save them or destroy them or both. The video was of a trapeze artist—the identity was irrelevant. What mattered was not who the artist was but what the artist was doing, which was: falling.

Falling and catching. Falling and being caught. The body releasing its grip on the bar and dropping—the drop lasting a fraction of a second, the fraction containing an eternity—and then the hands finding the next bar, the catch, the salvation, the body saying to gravity: not today.

If I stay high enough, he thought, they can't reach up to fix my hair.

The thought was not rational. The thought was thirteen years old and full of pain and the thought was perfect.

He began practicing in secret. The classes were at a small studio—a studio that was not prestigious and not photogenic and not the kind of place that architects would choose for their child. A studio that smelled of chalk and sweat and the specific, chemical, safety-mat smell of a space where bodies worked and fell and got up again.

He climbed. The ropes. The silks. The lyra. His body—small, lean, the body that had been designed for display—discovered a new purpose. The body was not decoration. The body was a tool. The body could climb and hold and release and catch and the climbing was not performance but conversation, the body speaking to the silk, the silk speaking to the body, the dialogue conducted in the language of tension and release and trust.

"You're a natural," the instructor said. "Your body knows how to trust."

The sentence landed in Lego's chest and stayed there—the first compliment he had received that was about what his body could do rather than what it looked like. The first time someone had seen him as a verb rather than a noun.

He stopped cutting.

Not immediately. Not the first day, not the first week. But gradually—the sessions at the studio replacing the sessions in the bathroom, the physical exhaustion replacing the emotional pain, the silk burns on his hands replacing the cuts on his arms. The scars healed. The new marks were different—earned, chosen, the marks of a person who was learning to fly rather than a person who was trying to feel.

He was finally stepping out of the frame his parents had built.

And then his brother left home. And his parents and sister went to Paris.

"The new apartment is lovely," his parents said. The video call was clear—high-resolution, the Parisian apartment visible behind them, the apartment that was their new stage, their new performance space, the new version of the mansion with different lilies and different floor wax and the same distance. "It will be all yours, Lego. Close to the center. Near the galleries and the boutiques. You'll have everything you need."

Lego looked at the screen. At his parents' faces. At the apartment behind them—the expensive apartment that they were offering as a substitute for themselves, the way they had always offered expensive things as substitutes for presence, the gifts arriving precisely on time and containing precisely the right items and conveying precisely nothing.

He knew he wouldn't go with them. And at only eighteen, he was alone.

The apartment was huge. The penthouse in Thonglor—high ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows, the kind of space that a person with different parents would have filled with roommates and parties and the chaotic, warm, communal living that young people were supposed to experience.

He was free. The freedom felt exactly like the loneliness.

And then he met Hong.

At a modeling event. Hong with the gray hair and the leather and the attitude—Hong, who looked at Lego and did not see a treasure or a display or a beautiful child. Hong, who looked at Lego and saw a person and treated that person the way Hong treated everyone: with sarcasm and honesty and the specific, reluctant, denied-but-obvious care of a person who pretended not to give a damn and gave every damn available.

"Don't get used to it," Hong said, after he'd helped Lego find the backstage entrance at a show they were both booked for—Lego lost, Hong annoyed, the two of them navigating the corridors of a venue that was designed for confusion. "I'm usually an asshole."

"I don't believe you," Lego said.

"You should. I have references."

Hong stared at him. Then laughed—the short, surprised, involuntary laugh of a person who had been caught off guard by someone who was faster than expected.

"How old are you?" Hong asked.

"Eighteen."

"Jesus. You're a baby."

"I'm not a baby. I can drive. I can vote. I can—"

"You're a baby with platform boots and too many piercings."

"The piercings are a statement."

"The statement is: 'I'm eighteen and I think pain is aesthetic.'"

"It is aesthetic."

"You're a baby. You have glitter on your face and you're wearing platform boots and you just laughed like a Disney character. You're a baby."

"And you're an asshole. So we're even."

Hong looked at him again. The look was longer this time—the look of a person who was recalibrating an assumption, who had expected a surface and was finding a depth.

"What's your name?" Hong asked.

"Lego."

"Lego." Hong repeated it. Testing the sound. "I'm Hong. And I'm going to regret this."

"Regret what?"

"Being nice to you. It sets a precedent."

Hong became the first person Lego chose. Not the first person who was given to him by circumstance or family or obligation—the first person he actively, deliberately, consciously selected. The way you selected a fabric for a costume. The way you selected a song for a routine. The way you selected the person who would stand next to you while you learned to be the person you were becoming.

Then he met Tui and Nut. Through the overlapping circles—through Nut's tattoo community, through Tui's photography work, through the specific, organic, unplanned way that people found each other in a city of twelve million.

And fell in love with Tui.

Tui, who acted like an older brother. Tui, who cooked and took photographs and carried containers and brought basil plants and remembered everyone's preferences and moved through the world with the warm, gravitational, patient energy of a person who had been taught by a sister and a beach and a grief that the important things were worth the time it took to do them right.

Tui, who kissed girls at parties. Tui, who talked to girls at parties. Tui, who existed in the comfortable, uncomplicated, heteronormative space that Lego could observe but not enter—the space where attraction was simple and expected and did not require explanation or courage or the specific, terrifying act of telling a person you loved that the love was not the kind they were expecting.

And Lego could only watch. Because he wasn't a girl.

Tui and Nut's protectiveness was warmth. The warmth that Lego had been looking for since the mansion—the warmth of people who showed up, who stayed, who did not treat him as a display or a treasure or a project but as a person who was worth feeding and worrying about and lifting up (literally, in Nut's case) and photographing (in Tui's case) and caring for in the thousand small, daily, unglamorous ways that caring required.

Lego let them think he was younger than he was—not in years but in experience, in damage, in the specific, heavy, adult knowledge that he carried beneath the brightness. He let them protect him because their protection felt like a warm blanket compared to the cold marble of his parents' house. He let them think the brightness was all there was.

I'm not enough. I'm broken.

Lego knew those words. From the mansion. From the stillness. From the pink bathwater and the years of looking in mirrors and seeing a display instead of a person. He knew what it meant to believe you were broken. And he knew that knowing was not the same as being able to help.

You couldn't un-break someone by telling them they weren't broken. The telling was necessary—but the telling was only the first coat of paint. The structure underneath needed evidence. Proof. The accumulated, daily, undeniable proof that came not from words but from actions, from the specific, repetitive, unglamorous labor of showing up and staying and touching and remembering and being present in the thousand small ways that presence required.

William needed evidence.

And the evidence was going to come from Est.

Lego knew this. The way he knew the tension of a silk before it broke, the way he knew the angle of a wrap before it slipped—instinctively, physically, the knowledge living in his body rather than his brain. William's heart was reaching for Est. And Est's heart—the heart behind the turtleneck—was reaching back. Lego could feel it. The same way he felt Nut's tension when Hong's name was mentioned. The same way he felt Tui's love in the basil plants and the containers and the breakfast

cooking.

The same way he felt his own love for Tui in the ache that lived behind his ribs.

Tui walked Lego to a taxi after dinner at the restaurant near Nut's studio.

The walk was short—the restaurant was on a main road, the taxis plentiful, the city's infrastructure making the gesture unnecessary and therefore meaningful. The meaningfulness of unnecessary gestures was something Tui understood—the extra photograph, the extra portion of food, the extra step, the extra moment spent in someone's presence for no reason other than the wanting to be there.

The evening air was warm. Bangkok warm—the wet, heavy, tropical warmth that pressed against the skin like a hand. The street sounds washed over them—the traffic, the vendors, the distant bass of a bar two blocks away.

"You don't have to walk me," Lego said. His voice was light—the bright voice, the performance voice, the voice he used when the cameras were on and the audience was watching. But Tui heard the undertone. The undertone that said: please walk me.

"I know I don't have to." Tui said.

"Then why do you?"

Tui looked at him. The streetlight was orange—the warm, sodium-vapor orange that made everything look like a memory, that turned the present into something that already felt like the past, that gave every moment the specific, golden, elegiac quality of something that was being remembered even while it was happening.

Lego in the orange light. The braids—two of them tonight, resting over his shoulders. The platform boots. The oversized cardigan, falling off one shoulder. The face without the performance makeup—bare, honest, the face that Tui preferred, though he'd never said so.

"Because walking is how I think," Tui said. "And I think better when you're next to me."

The sentence surprised him. Not because it was untrue—it was the truest thing he'd said all week—but because it had come out without permission, without rehearsal, without the careful, patient, self-protective filtering that Tui usually applied to everything he said to Lego.

The sentence sat in the air between them—in the orange light, in the warm night, in the space between a photographer and a performer on a sidewalk in a city of twelve million people.

Lego's face did the thing. The softening. The real smile—not the bright one, not the performance one, not the nuclear beam that could power a city block. The small one. The private one. The one that existed only for the people who had earned it.

"That's—" Lego started. A taxi pulled up. The timing was terrible and perfect. "That's my ride." Lego said.

He opened the door. One foot in, one foot on the sidewalk. The posture of a person who was leaving and staying simultaneously, the body divided between the going and the remaining.

He looked back at Tui.

The orange light. The braids. The eyes—brown tonight, the contacts out, the real color, the honest color. The smile still there—small, warm, the smile of a person who had received something they needed and was holding it carefully.

"Saturday," Lego said. "My show. Don't be late."

"I'm never late."

"I know." Lego's smile widened—not to the nuclear level, but to the level above the private one, the level that was warm and bright and intended for a specific audience of one. "That's why I trust you."

He got in. The door closed. The taxi pulled away.

Tui stood on the sidewalk and watched the taillights disappear into the traffic—red, diminishing, the color of silk, the color of the fabric that Lego climbed, the color of the thing that held him in the air.

He stood there for a long time.

The city moved around him. The traffic flowed. The vendors called. The bass from the bar two blocks away traveled through the concrete, through his shoes, up his legs, into the center of his chest where it settled and stayed.

He thought about Lego. About the softening. About the smile. About that's why I trust you and the way the sentence had landed in his chest and was still there, warm, persistent, the kind of sentence that didn't fade.

He thought about his sister. About the beach at seven AM. About the hand in his, pulling him toward the shoreline. About the bass traveling through the sand, through his feet, into the center of his chest.

He was keeping this. The orange light. The braids. The taxi. The smile. The sentence.

Some things were too important to capture. Some things needed to be kept the

other way—in the body, in the chest, in the place where the bass lived and the grief lived and the love lived, the place where the things that mattered were stored not as images but as sensations, not as photographs but as the feeling of standing on a sidewalk in the orange light and watching the person you loved disappear into the city and knowing—with the patient, certain, tide-pool-trained knowledge of a man who understood that the most important things revealed themselves to those who were willing to wait—that the person would come back.

That Saturday would arrive.

That the silk would be red and the performance would be beautiful and he would be there, in the audience, with his camera, doing the only thing he knew how to do: looking at everything.

And keeping it.